

What must be done to fight the coronavirus pandemic

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (United States)
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The coronavirus pandemic continues to spread through dozens of countries around the world in what is among the worst outbreaks of infectious disease in a century, threatening the lives of millions of people.

Refuting the White House's criminally dishonest dismissal of the disease's severity, the number of cases in the United States continues to rise rapidly. The response at every level of government has been negligent and incompetent, exposing a total lack of planning and preparation in the world's richest capitalist country.

Even as the White House was downplaying the lethality of the virus and equating it with the common flu, the United Nations' World Health Organization (WHO) reported on March 4 that 3.4 percent of people infected by the coronavirus had died.

There is no way to accurately determine the extent of the infection in the United States because of the absence of testing equipment.

The indifference of the Trump administration to the health of the population is no better, and perhaps worse, than the attitude of the pharaohs of ancient Egypt to the slaves. The media has spent far more time bemoaning the fall in share values on Wall Street than the loss of human life.

Congress has authorized a mere \$8.3 billion to fight the outbreak—less than one tenth the annual cost of the war in Afghanistan and one fifteenth the wealth of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos.

Without emergency intervention, there is a danger that this pandemic will spread uncontrollably throughout the population and cause a staggering loss of life. In the worst-case scenario, outlined this week by Dr. Marc Lipsitch of Harvard University, as much as 60 percent of the global population could become infected. At current rates of mortality, this would mean the deaths of over a hundred million men, women and children.

As the World Health Organization pointed out in its February 28 report, "The COVID-19 virus is a new pathogen that is highly contagious, can spread quickly, and must be considered capable of causing enormous health, economic and societal impacts in any setting."

The report noted that the virus "is transmitted via droplets and fomites [objects] during close unprotected contact between an infector and infectee." The WHO added that "human-to-human transmission of the COVID-19 virus is largely occurring in families."

Measures can be taken to dramatically reduce the number of infections and prevent the loss of countless lives. But the response of governments throughout the world has been disastrously inadequate and an untold number of people will die as a result. The vast majority of the victims will be from the working class, the poor and other vulnerable sections of society.

This social catastrophe must be prevented. All sections of the working class, youth and students must demand that governments take emergency action to stop the spread of the virus and provide the necessary care for all those who are infected by the disease. This requires a massive reallocation of social resources.

The principle that must guide the response is that the needs of society overrule the interests of profit. Capitalist calculations of share values and profits must not be allowed to limit, undermine, or prevent the combating of the disease.

No expense can be spared in making testing for the coronavirus available immediately in every country. Trillions of dollars must be invested internationally in testing regimes, the manufacture of protective clothing, the purchase of oxygen machines and other necessary technology, the construction of new hospitals and the expansion of existing hospital facilities.

From this standpoint we raise the following demands:

Accessible and universal testing: There is no way to combat the spread of coronavirus without testing that is accessible to all those who show symptoms. It is essential that testing be made available immediately throughout the United States and the entire world.

Free high-quality treatment: Stopping the spread of the coronavirus is impossible in a society where only those with money can see a doctor. In a country like the United States, where the average household cannot afford to pay cash for a \$400 expense, providing free treatment is inseparable from controlling the spread of the disease.

Every country must immediately begin to provide free testing and treatment, and pay all medical costs associated with the coronavirus. Medical care is not a privilege, it is a right!

Paid sick leave for all workers: It is vital to ensure that workers do not feel pressured to work when they are sick. Corporations and governments must immediately begin providing paid sick leave for all employees.

Equality of care: In the United States, a vast and disproportionate share of medical resources is monopolized by the financial oligarchy. Reports abound of the V.I.P. emergency rooms in Manhattan and the Hamptons for the super-rich, and the massive emergency bunkers and private medical treatment centers being constructed by the oligarchs in their own mansions.

There can be no preferential treatment in combating this pandemic! Equality of care is not only a moral question, but an urgent social necessity. The private doctors of the rich and those engaged in vanity procedures must be immediately drafted to treat the general population. Access to care must be determined by necessity, not wealth. The rich have the right to the same treatment as anyone else—but no better.

Protect refugees, prisoners and the homeless: Around the world, millions of people are homeless, millions more are fleeing war and poverty, and countless others are imprisoned under conditions that make them vulnerable to infectious disease. Everything must be done to improve the conditions of prisoners, refugees and the homeless and provide these vulnerable populations with access to hygiene and the best quality medical care.

Stop price gouging: Medical supplies and sanitary products must be made available to households and medical workers, and all those profiting from the crisis should be held criminally liable.

Safe working conditions: Employers and the government must be responsible for providing all employees—from medical workers to factory, warehouse, retail and service workers—with a safe work environment.

The supervision of safety cannot be left to the employers. Workers should form rank-and-file committees to make sure that safety codes are being observed by the employers and measures are being taken to combat the spread of the disease. These committees will ensure that workers are not compelled to work in an unsafe environment and that coworkers who become ill receive the necessary treatment and support.

Support the ill and the quarantined: No one should fear that being designated and quarantined means neglect and ostracism. Workers should form neighborhood committees to ensure that those who are sick and quarantined are safe and have social support and the necessary food and supplies.

For international collaboration: US economic sanctions against Iran are causing severe medical shortages in a country with over 3,000 coronavirus cases, and the US political establishment has been waging a campaign to demonize Chinese scientists and doctors. All sanctions must immediately be lifted and all restrictions on international medical collaboration ended!

In responding to this dangerous disease, one principle must guide us: that human need is primary. Combating an epidemic that

threatens millions of lives cannot be subordinated to considerations of private profit.

Any claim that there is no money to save the lives of millions of people is a contemptible lie. In the United States alone, there are more than 13,000 individuals with over \$30 million in wealth. Just three people—Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos and Warren Buffett—own more wealth than the poorest half of American society.

Funding shortfalls must be covered by emergency seizures of the fortunes of ultra-high-net-worth individuals.

It is necessary to build a mass movement of the working class to demand an immediate emergency response to the crisis, to be paid for by the corporations, the government and the financial oligarchy.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote its statement of February 28, 2020:

In demanding that capitalist governments implement these emergency measures, the international working class does not abandon its fundamental aim: the ending of the capitalist system. Rather, the fight for emergency action will raise the consciousness of the working class, develop its understanding of the need for international class solidarity, and increase its political self-confidence.

The opportunities provided by modern medical technology to stop such an outbreak are unprecedented. Never before has so much been known about a pathogen so early: Its genome has been sequenced and effective tests have been designed within a matter of weeks.

But the outbreak of the disease has exposed the gaping chasm between the enormous promise of modern medical technology and the totally irrational character of a society based on the private accumulation of wealth.

Whatever the outcome of this pandemic, the crisis irrefutably establishes the fact that capitalism cannot deal with the existential threats facing humanity—from climate change to natural disasters and infectious diseases. The coronavirus crisis poses the urgent necessity for the socialist reorganization of society.



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